SOUND OF SILENCE
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Psalm 46
1 Kings 19:1–13
Mark 6:30–32

"The Lord was not in the wind . . . the earthquake . . . the fire; and after the fire the sound of sheer silence."
1 Kings 19:11–12 (NRSV)

We praise you, we worship you, we adore you.
You hold the heavens in your hand;
all stars rejoice in your glory.
Your peace blows over the earth,
and the breath of your mouth fills all space.
Your voice comes in the thunder of the storm,
and the song of the wind whispers of your majesty.
You satisfy all things living with your abundance,
and our hearts bow at your presence.
Accept us, your children, Eternal Father,
and hearken to our prayer.
Bend over us, Eternal Love, and bless us. Amen.

Book of Common Worship (Presbyterian Church U.S.A.)

After the wind, the earthquake, and the fire, a sound of sheer silence.

It's impossible for some of us to hear that peculiar phrase without thinking of a Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel song, "The Sound of Silence." It was a Grammy-award-winning album, and millions of people heard it in the motion picture *The Graduate*. It was the 1960s, a time of civil unrest and political uncertainty. People were demonstrating and marching for civil rights and against the Vietnam War; there was widespread unrest on college and university campuses and general dissatisfaction with American cultural values. Dustin Hoffman was the graduate, returning home after completing college in the East. It's a noisy trip through airports and on airplanes, people pushing and shoving at the baggage carousel. In the background, the haunting music:

> Hello darkness, my old friend;
> I've come to talk with you again,
> . . . the sound of silence.

When he arrives home in Southern California, there is a raucous cocktail party, to which his parents have invited their friends, all representing upper-middle class American culture, to celebrate the graduate's graduation. He's upstairs, staring at a fish tank.

And the music:

> In the naked light I saw . . .
> people talking without speaking,
> people hearing without listening,
> . . . the sound of silence.

When he finally reluctantly and less than enthusiastically joins the party, one of his parents' friends, a successful businessman, takes him aside for one of the all-time classic lines in American film:

> "I just want to say one word to you—just one word," the businessman says.
>
> "Yes sir," the graduate answers.
>
> "Are you listening?"
>
> "Yes, I am."
>
> "Plastics," the businessman whispers. "There's a great future in plastics. Will you think about it?"
>
> "Yes, I will," the graduate responds.

Simon and Garfunkel:

> And the people bowed and prayed
> To the neon God they made. . . .
> The words of the prophets are written on the subway walls and tenement halls.
> And whispered in the sounds of silence

The song is still around forty-five years later, and I find it quite impossible not to think about it when I hear the Bible story about Elijah in the cave hearing the sound of sheer silence. (The older translation was "the still small voice of calm.") We rather like that notion, that God speaks softly,

calmly, whenever we are silent. Unfortunately that's not what the text says. The best translation from the Hebrew is not a still small voice at all but something far closer to Paul Simon's "the sound of silence." The most recent translation is "the sound of sheer silence."

How it all comes to be is one of the best stories in the Bible, one of the Bible stories everybody should know. It's around 900 BCE. Ahab is King of Israel who marries a foreigner, Jezebel. Jezebel is trouble from the start. Not only is she a foreigner, but she has her own religion and she takes it very seriously. In fact, her father was a priest. The religion was Baalism, the religion of the Canaanite people before Israel arrived in the land. The historians call it a nature religion. Its focus was the mysterious life force in nature, the miracle of regeneration and reproduction, the mystery of human sexuality. Some Baal worship was pretty interesting, to say the least. Jezebel is so devoted to her religion that when she marries Ahab and moves into the king's palace, she brings along 400 of her favorite priests and 400 favorite prophets.

Ahab has a big problem here. Israel worships Yahweh, the one God, and worship of other gods, polytheism, is strictly forbidden. But poor Ahab has something like 800 foreign religious professionals living under the same roof with him. Reminds me of something Mark Twain once said about ministers: "Preachers are a lot like cow manure," he said. "When there's a whole lot of them together they raise a big stink. But spread them out across the land and they do some good." Ahab has 800 clergymen living with him.

Enter Elijah, God's man. He tells Ahab that because of his 800 houseguests there will be a drought, and there is. Two years pass, the drought continues: the 800 priests and prophets are still there. Ahab summons Elijah, and Elijah decides to take things into his own hands, challenges Jezebel's priests and prophets to a contest, a kind of pray-off on Mt. Carmel.

Now the Bible is not always neat and sanitary or logical, never more so than in what happens next.

The priests and prophets pray and chant and sing and beg their god to send down fire. Nothing happens. So they try harder. They're singing and praying and dancing around and Elijah can't resist. "Maybe your god is taking a nap," he says. Actually it's a lot more earthy than that.

The priests and prophets step aside. It's Elijah's turn. Elijah prays and Yahweh sends fire down. Elijah wins. We wish the story would end right there without the next detail, which is that Elijah slaughters all of them, how the text doesn't say. But the drought ends. The chapter ends with a

very happy King Ahab riding home in his chariot in the rain, Elijah running ecstatically ahead.

When Ahab arrives home to tell Jezebel what happened: that God is God, not Baal, and that her priests and prophets are all gone, the story takes a dark turn. Jezebel is not happy, dictates a letter to Elijah, the content of which is, “Within twenty-four hours, you’re a dead man.”

Elijah does the smart thing: runs for his life, out into the wilderness, considers giving up, and eventually finds a cave. It’s good to have a cave to hide in, but what a night it turned out to be. First there was a howling windstorm, strong enough to split rocks. Then an earthquake, not a good thing when you’re trying to sleep in a cave. Then a violent lightening storm, fire crackling all around. Finally silence: an eerie, utterly noiseless silence. Not a whisper, not a leaf blowing. The sound of sheer silence. Elijah wraps himself in a blanket, cautiously walks to the mouth of the cave to look out, and then the voice comes, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” and “Go back now; you have work to do.”

What a story: violence, fear, terror, flight, hiding, chaos, more fear, noise, finally a silence so complete that it has its own sound, and then God speaks. God speaks into that sheer silence, and given all Elijah has been through on behalf of God, it’s not exactly what Elijah wants to hear: “What are you doing here?” and “Go back to work.”

It’s not difficult to identify with the chaos, the fear, and terror of that night in the cave. “Nations are in an uproar, kingdoms totter,” the psalmist wrote, and it sounds to me like the front page of the newspaper this morning.

And all that noise: we live in a very noisy place, you and I do. You might even call it “urban auditory overload.” City people adjust to and accommodate constant noise: automobiles, buses, fire trucks, ambulance sirens, cabs honking, motorcycles on the Outer Drive full throttle, cigarette boats cruising the lakefront, woofers through the open car window so loud you can literally feel the rumble, street musicians—trombones, trumpets, saxophones, and a full set of drums. The *Tribune* review of the new motion picture *Transformers* led with a headline “Robots clash, as eardrums take a beating.” It called the movie everyone is talking about “an extraordinarily destructive tantrum” and quoted one of the actors who said the noise level in the movie is aneurysm inducing. My ten-year-old grandson can’t wait to see it.

People of a certain age, I can testify, find themselves shunning popular restaurants because of the noise level in favor of quieter, less flashy establishments where you can actually hear your dinner partner. We stand around at crowded parties smiling, nodding politely, saying “Oh how

wonderful! Isn't that marvelous?" without the foggiest notion of what it was we have just agreed to—because we can't hear.

Doctors warn about the long-term effects of exposure to loud noise, not only in the obvious places—the airline industry, heavy manufacturing, heavy metal rock concerts—but the sustained, everyday level of noise with which we live. Silence is not an easy experience to come by in the city. I like to remind myself that some noise is beautiful. An ambulance siren is, after all, the sound of human compassion and love, the sound of a public covenant that when one of us is in trouble, all the rest of us will get out of the way so the one can find help. The roar of a fire truck is the beautiful sound of all of us trying to come to the aid of one of us in trouble. The whine of a jet engine noise is a beautiful noise to a serviceman or woman returning from duty to spouse, children, community.

Some noise is beautiful, and some silence is cruel. For lonely people, silence is painful. Silence can be sullen, resentful, a very eloquent way of expressing anger.

"Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while," Jesus one time said to his disciples, "for many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat." It's a favorite Bible verse at this time of year, by the way, when fortunate people are able to get away, to pull back and settle down, to waste time star gazing or watching the wind play in the leaves or enjoying a leisurely lunch or simply listening to the silence.

Part of what religion ought to do for us is provide a time and place for a little silence. Our Garth does that for Michigan Avenue all day, every day, a cloistered, quiet place. This sanctuary, doors open all day, invites people into silence day in and day out. Many people accept the invitation, walk in out of the noisy, crowded sidewalk to sit and experience the sound of silence.

The late Thomas Merton, who mostly lived in monastic silence, wrote, "If you love God, you will love silence" (*No Man Is an Island)*. One of my earliest experiences of the power of silence was at the church camp to which I was sent each summer. After dinner we walked to Vesper Hill, and as you began up the path, everyone had to stop talking and observe a vigil of silence—no small challenge for lively youngsters. But we did it, and the little choir sang, "The Lord is in his holy temple: let all the earth keep silence before him." What I remember are the sounds I had not heard before—birds, insects, the wind in the pine trees. Silence, I learned, is full of sound.

If we're not exactly afraid of silence, as Thomas Merton one time suggested, we do find it uncomfortable at times. Occasionally in worship the leader will

invite the congregation to pray silently. Some love it. Some find it awkward, uncomfortable. Leaders learn that a Presbyterian congregation's capacity for sustained silence is about thirty seconds; twenty is better.

Kurt Vonnegut, who died last month, wrote a powerful novel about war, *Slaughterhouse Five,* out of his own experience as a POW in World War II. He was kept in an underground meat locker in Dresden on the night Allied bombers leveled the city, killing 35,000 civilians, far more than at Hiroshima. We didn't know it at the time. We still don't know it, because we don't want to. So Vonnegut begins his novel with one word "Listen." Stop talking about all the reasons it was necessary to end the war and simply listen to what happened, he said.

Sometimes there is a sound of sheer silence. Sometimes silence is eloquent. It was a powerful eloquent silence when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, humiliated, accused of sedition, bound, hands tied behind his back, a crown of thorns pressed into his forehead. "Speak!" Pilate commanded. "Have you no reply? Say something!" Jesus made no reply and Pilate was amazed, the Bible says. Sometimes silence is so eloquent.

"What should I say, Dad?" A young woman was summoned to the hospital bedside of her father, who was dying. She was alone, miles from home. My daughter wanted to call her dear friend. "What should I say?" my daughter asked. It's a question we all ask ourselves and sometimes ask the minister who, we assume, must have a list of good things to say for every occasion. But sometimes you can't say much. Sometimes there aren't words big enough or appropriate enough. Sometimes sitting in silence is the best and most helpful thing we can do. And so my answer was, "Don't try to say much. Say, 'God loves your father. God loves you and so do I. I'm praying for you. I'm with you.' And tell your friend to read the Twenty-Third Psalm to remind her that she and her father are not alone in this valley."

Sometimes sitting in silence, holding a hand, patting a cheek, is better than saying anything.

Martin Marty wrote a very helpful book, *A Cry of Absence.* It's about God's absence, God's silence. He quotes a poem by John Crowe Ransom.

> Two evils, monstrous either one apart
> Possessed me, and were long and loath at going;
> A cry of Absence, Absence, in the heart
> And in the wood the furious winter blowing.

The absence can come, Marty wrote, to a "waste space when the divine is distant, the sacred is remote, when God is silent."

There are times in every life when we cry and God does not answer. We ask why? Why this? Why me? And God is silent.

> The dark night of the soul. . . .
> “Have you forgotten to be gracious?” the psalmist asked.
>
> “Is your steadfast love gone?
> How long, O Lord, how long?”
>
> And at the very depths of the silence, Marty wrote,
> “there is the Yes of an awakening, responsive God.” (p. 148)

It was after the wind, earthquake, and fire that Elijah heard the sound of silence and, after the silence, God.

“Come apart to a quiet place,” Jesus told his friends.

So hear a simple but important word God has for you this morning.

Come apart—somehow, somewhere. In the midst of the busy, crowded, noisy life you are living, come apart. Find a time, a place—make a time, a place—to hear the sound of silence.

Dear God, in the silence of this place, these moments together,
come to us, speak the word you have for us.
Settle us, center us.
May we hear the sound of sheer silence.

Amen.